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Special Guest Article in Celebration of the 50th Anniversary of the Discovery of the Coelacanth

REMINISCENCES OF THE DISCOVERY OF THE COELACANTH, *LATIMERIA CHALUMNAE* SMITH

Based on Notes from a Diary Kept at the Time

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The Editor is pleased to present this special guest article on the discovery of the coelacanth by the discoverer herself, Marjorie Courtenay-Latimer, retired director of the East London Museum. Miss Courtenay-Latimer, Hon. Doc. Phil., an Honorary Member of the International Society of Cryptozoology since its founding in 1982, graciously consented to prepare this article, based on notes from the diary which she kept at the time. We are privileged to be able to publish this account—written in her own words—50 years after what many have called the zoological discovery of the century.—Editor.

This Article Is Dedicated to the Memory of Captain Hendrik Goosen, Who Died on January 5, 1990.

Could this day, December 22, 1988, really be 50 years since the greatest trauma in my life's career had occurred? Oh, yes! Reading through my old diary, I am again woken to the facts revealed therein.

I therefore pen these facts from my diary as a tribute to my friend and colleague Captain Hendrik Goosen, to whom the world owes a debt of gratitude; for without his interest and energy, there never would have been a coelacanth to astound the world of natural science.

I was appointed and commenced duty on August 24, 1931, to the small East London Museum. There was little to display. But the Latimers were collectors, and their objects and interests—in ethnology, ornithology, botany, and archaeology—and a fairly comprehensive collection of marine seashells,

FIG. 1.—Captain Hendrik Goosen and the author celebrating the 50th anniversary of their discovery of the coelacanth fish—seen at right. This photograph was taken in the Coelacanth Hall of the East London Museum on February 16, 1989, exactly 50 years after J. L. B. Smith confirmed that the "strange fish" was, in fact, a coelacanth. (J. Richard Greenwell.)

formed the nucleus of the exhibitions on view. Captain Goosen became interested, and he frequently visited the Museum to see how we were progressing. Thus a lifelong friendship was formed.

During the first 5 years of building the East London Museum, I had taken no leave, and by 1936 considerable leave was due me. I asked the East London Museum Board of Trustees to grant me leave to go to Bird Island to collect specimens. Bird Island was 40 miles east of Port Elizabeth, and my parents and I were taken there by packet boat, laden with supplies for us and for the small community of people living on the island.

We sailed from Port Elizabeth at 5 a.m. on September 2, 1936, and remained on the island for 6 months. For me, this was heaven on earth, for, wherever I looked, specimens were to be seen and collected. Sea birds of all species, nests and eggs, fish, seashells, mammals, and much more, came to a happy end for preservation in my hands. During this time, Captain Goosen, then skipper of the trawler *Aristea,* used to stop by the island to get fresh rabbits for a change of diet for his crew, and to watch the preparation of the specimens I had collected.

Towards the end of my sojourn on the island, he called in again, and I mentioned to him that I had collected 15 packing cases of specimens, but did not know how I would get them back to the Museum. He thought for a

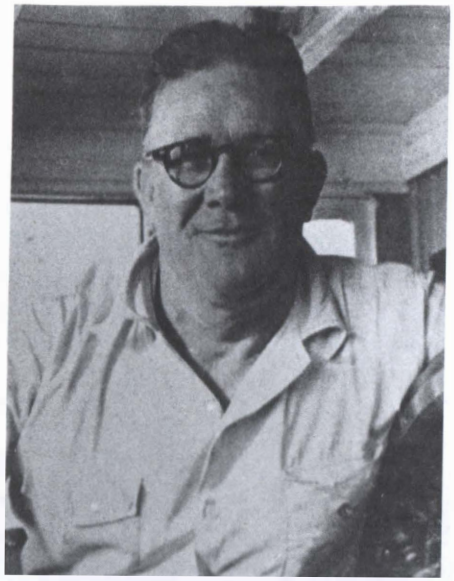

FIG. 2.—Captain Hendrik Goosen in the 1930's, when his nets brought up the "strange fish" which was saved for the author. (East London Museum.)

while, and then said: "Well, if you don't mind the wait, I can bring in one case at a time as we return to port."

How grateful I was to him. True to his offer, this is what he did. Each time the *Aristea* docked, a case was brought to the Museum, and then when he changed to the trawler *Nerine,* he finally delivered the last of the 15 cases of specimens.

Captain Goosen then said that, if we wished, he would continue collecting for the Museum, and could also collect live specimens for the Aquarium, which had been opened on December 2, 1931.

So, Captain Goosen, Mr. G. G. Smith (manager of the Modern Engineering Works and Vice President of the Museum), and I then designed a tank for collecting. This container was to keep specimens for the Museum, and there was another tank to hold water for live specimens for the Aquarium.

These tanks were then placed on the trawler *Nerine* through the kind permission of Messrs. Irvin and Johnson, who owned the trawler fleet. Thus Captain Goosen began his collecting, with our first consignment arriving on April 22, 1937.

The marine collection at the East London Museum grew; many beautiful specimens of coral and other treasures of the deep continued to be brought in. Unfortunately, we had little equipment at the Museum, so I had to

personally skin, cast, mount, and preserve all material brought to me as quickly as possible.

I had met Dr. J. L. B. Smith in the early 1930's, and he would often visit the Museum. In 1937, he became interested in the marine specimens being brought in by Captain Goosen, and he said he would be pleased to have any duplicates of fish specimens we did not need. Dr. Smith was then lecturer of chemistry at Rhodes University, in Grahamstown, but he was also very knowledgeable on South African fishes. I approached the Railway Superintendent, a Mr. van der Spuy, for permission to send such fish specimens over by motor transport to Grahamstown, and he agreed to do this.

And so, the stage was set for the discovery which was to follow. The notes below are extracted from my diary entries at the time.

December 22, 1938. A phone call at 9:45 a.m. (A new phone, our very first, had only just been installed on November 20, 1938): "Miss Latimer? This is Jackson of Irvin and Johnson speaking. There is a ton and a half of fish specimens for you on the trawler *Nerine*. Are you interested?"

Oh dear! I was so busy completing the display of the large fossil reptile *Kannemeyeria wilsonii* Broom, which we had excavated at Tarkastad, and for which Mr. Robert Wilson had given us a special display case.

I thought of how good everyone at Irvin and Johnson had been to me, including, of course, Captain Goosen and his crew. So, it being so near to Christmas, I thought the least I could do would be to go down and wish them the compliments of the season. I then phoned for a taxi, and took Enoch, my 20-year-old Xhosa assistant (who constituted my entire staff), and a grain sack, and set off for the Irvin and Johnson wharf.

When we arrived, I went into the office, and Mr. Jackson told me that all the specimens were still on the trawler *Nerine*. As I left the office, he called out after me, saying: "Miss Latimer, not quite a ton and half, but a Happy Christmas to you!"

All the crew had gone ashore except for an old Scotsman, who told me the specimens were on the fo'c'sle deck. He helped me up, and there I found a pile of specimens: sharks, rays, rat-tailed fish, sponges, gorgonian corals, etc., all looking much like what we already had in the Museum collection. I told the Scotsman I would not be taking any of them, but I nevertheless went through them carefully. I then noticed a blue fin sticking up from beneath the pile. I uncovered the specimen, and, behold, there appeared the most beautiful fish I had ever seen. It was a pale, mauvy blue, with faint flecks of whitish spots; it had an iridescent silver-blue-green sheen all over. Just on 5 feet long.

I gazed at the fish. What could it be? A voice broke the silence: "Yes, Miss, it is a strange fish. I have been trawling for over 30 years, but I have never seen its like. It snapped at the Captain's fingers as he looked at it in the trawl net. It was trawled with about a ton and a half of fish, and what

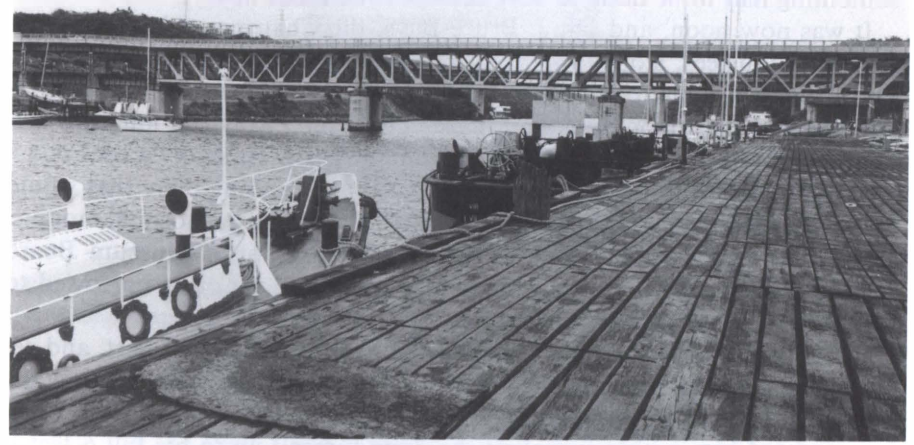

FIG. 3.—A 1989 photograph of the exact spot at the port of East London where Captain Goosen used to dock his Irvin and Johnson trawler, the *Nerine*, and where the author found the first coelacanth specimen. (J. Richard Greenwell.)

you see here." I told him that I would definitely take this one back to the Museum.

I called Enoch, and he and I carefully placed it on the grain sack and took it down to the waiting taxi. To my surprise, the taximan said: "I refuse to take any stinking fish in my car." I said: "It is not stinking. It is perfectly fresh, and if that is the case, you can go and I will get another taxi. I brought you here to collect fish for the Museum." With that, he relented, and stood with his hands on his hips while Enoch and I loaded it carefully into the boot [trunk] of the car.

At the Museum, we placed it on the table where I had just been working on the fossil reptile display, and then I began a literature search. I had little information on fish. I had *The Fish of South Africa* by Dr. Barnard, of the South African Museum, but little else. At the back of my mind I kept thinking of lines I had written at school: "A ganoid fish is a fossil fish." Could this be a fossil fish? I also had an old book, *The Study of Fishes,* by Albert C. L. G. Gunther, given to me by a Dr. J. Innes-Brownlee. Perhaps that might help.

I looked up ganoid fish on page 47. It stated that ganoid fish are hard and bony, and covered with a layer of enamel. So was the fish now lying on my table. Could it be? I continued searching, and on page 365 traced it, uncertainly, to Coelacanthidae. No, I thought, this is impossible. A ganoid fish is a *fossil* fish. This is a *live* fish! It cannot be a fossil fish! In any case, I knew something had to be done to save this specimen; but how?

It was now noon, and Dr. J. Bruce-Bays, the Chairman of the Museum Board of Trustees, stopped by. I showed him the fish with great glee. He said: "Oh, yes, a big rock cod." "No," I said, "not with these strange limb-like fins and that puppy-dog tail in the caudal fin." Maybe a lungfish? But then there were those hard, rugose scales! "Oh, yes," he said, "a rock cod." I then hurried off to the public library, but found nothing there that would help. I decided that a good place to preserve it would be the hospital morgue, and I sent Enoch with a note to Mr. W. E. Sargeant, a Museum Board member, asking for the use of his hand cart, which we often borrowed to fetch heavy supplies from town.

Enoch and I then carefully reloaded the fish onto the hand cart, and set off for the hospital, much to the annoyance of pedestrians walking along the pavement [sidewalk]. At the morgue, I asked to see Mr. E. Evans, but when I confronted him with my request, he drew himself up to his full 6 feet—his eyes almost popping out of his head—looked down his nose, and said: "I have never heard of such an iniquitous request! What would everyone think?" "Oh," said I, "they're all asleep anyway, and it would be just until I could get someone to classify it for me." "No! Most definitely no!" said he. Dejected, I went back to Enoch and the fish, and said: "Now let's go to the Cold Storage Commission." "Yes, Miss," answered my faithful assistant.

It was now 2:30 p.m. On arrival at the cold storage, I asked to see Mr. Latimer (no relation of ours). I asked him if we could keep the fish in the cold storage. He came out and looked at it, but said: "No, most definitely not—no stinking fish in the cold storage!" It was perfectly fresh, no odor about it at all. After a heated argument, I left, now even more despondent. I then decided to take it to Mr. Robert Center, an old Scotsman, who was a good taxidermist, but not very skilled at mounting fish. He agreed to save it, but said he needed formalin to preserve it for a few days. I went to Mr. J. Forbes, a chemist who had always been kind to me, and, although formalin was in short supply at the time, he agreed to spare me some.

My next stop was home, where I asked my mother, Mrs. E. Courtenay-Latimer, for a bed sheet. Back at Mr. Center's, we tore the sheet into strips and bound the fish with them, pouring diluted formalin all over it. We then covered it with newspaper. I returned to the Museum and tried to reach Dr. Smith on the phone, but Dr. J. Rennie, who was the lecturer on paleontology at Rhodes University, told me that Dr. Smith was out; he agreed to give him the message. I then wrote Dr. Smith a detailed letter, telling him about

FIG. 4.—Robert Center, the taxidermist to whom the author went in desperation to save the first coelacanth specimen in December, 1938. (East London Museum.)

the fish and the steps I had taken to save it, and requesting that he come and classify it for me. I delivered the letter to the Post Office, and then caught the bus home. Thus ended an exciting day!

December 23, 1938. I went down to Mr. Center's, and we checked the fish. It had now turned a very dark gray in color. I made a rough sketch, and wrote a *second* letter to Dr. Smith, enclosing the sketch. The early summer heat was intense. Time went by.

December 27, 1938. 9 a.m. I went down to Mr. Center's. He had kept the newspapers covering the specimen damp with formalin, but he told me he did not think we would be able to keep it much longer—it had been 6 days now—in the intense heat. I said: "Well, I'll return at 5 p.m. By then, we should have a letter from Dr. Smith." But by 4:30 p.m. there was still no news. I told Mr. Center we could not risk letting the fish rot, and that it would be best to skin it and save what we could. I suggested that he cut it under the belly to save the scales, rather than on one side—as most fish mounts were done in those days. I watched as he skinned it. The flesh was greeny-blue, and as he cut into the backbone, oil spurted out. I quickly gathered a bottleful. It was smooth and fine; it did not feel greasy, nor did it smell after 6 days. It had a very fine texture, and was pale yellow in color. He then cut the hard bony tongue out, which I took home to examine.

December 28, 1938. 5 p.m. I went to see Mr. Center again. He was cleaning the skin, and said: "Don't forget to bring the tongue back." Back home, I discovered that my mother had thrown it away! In desperation, I searched through the rubbish and found it! How close it had been to being lost forever.

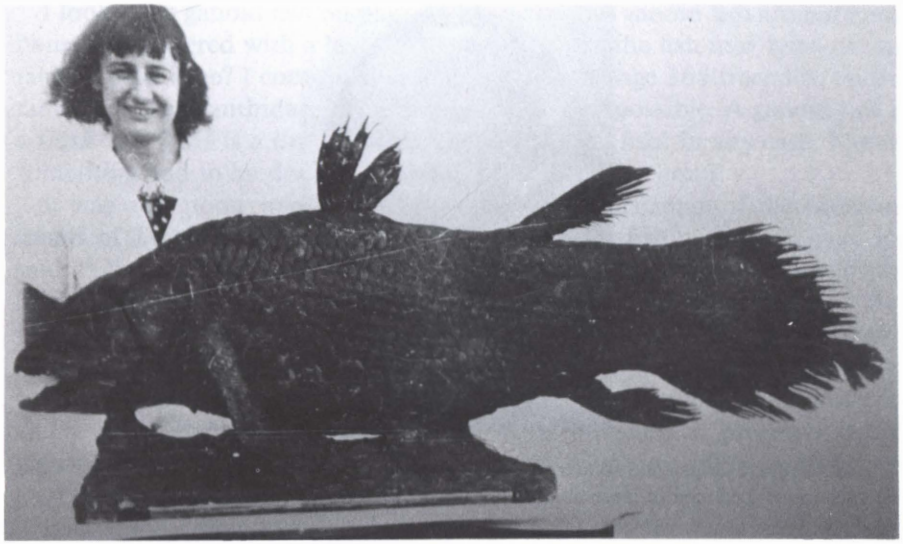

FIG. 5.—The author 50 years ago with the just-mounted first specimen of the coelacanth, later named *Latimeria chalumnae* in her honor by J. L. B. Smith. (East London Museum.)

December 29, 1938. 5 p.m. I took the tongue to Mr. Center. He was busy making a mannequin to put the skin over—the skin was very difficult to handle—in order not to disturb the scales.

January 9, 1939. Today, joy of joys, first contact from Dr. Smith—a wire reading: "SAVE VISCERA FISH INTERESTING SMITH." I hurried to Mr. Center, whom I had asked to keep the internal organs and tissues, but, alas, he said that, with the heat and length of time, they had been discarded after 12 days. He was also having difficulty with the skin, which was very oily and now a dark brown in color because of the formalin.

January 19, 1939. At last, a phone call from Dr. Smith saying he would come over to see the fish on February 16, at about 10 a.m.

January 24, 1939. A letter from Dr. Smith castigating me for the loss of the internal organs. Had he come when I first tried to contact him, on December 22, there would have been no loss at all.

January 25, 1939. Mr. Center brought the fish, which he had mounted as best he could, to the Museum. The Board of Trustees still did not seem interested. I had the mounted specimen in my office, on the fossil table, as we had no case big enough to enclose it. Wires, phone calls, and letters went back and forth between myself and Dr. Smith.

February 16, 1939. I walked to work at 6 a.m. Such excitement! My thoughts in a turmoil. Perhaps I had been wrong. Perhaps it was a rock cod, as Dr. Bruce-Bays had said. Oh, no, forget that thought! At 10:30 a.m., Dr.

FIG. 6.—J. L. B. Smith with his wife Mary Margaret in the 1930's. Upon seeing the coelacanth for the first time, he told the author: "Lass, this discovery will be on the lips of every scientist in the world." (J. L. B. Smith Institute of Ichthyology.)

Smith walked into my office, and I showed him the fish mounted on the table. He walked twice round the table looking at it, and confirmed that it was a coelacanth. He then said: "Lass, this discovery will be on the lips of every scientist in the world. I always thought someday one of these primitive fish would appear."

I had previously told the East London *Daily Dispatch* that Dr. Smith would be arriving on this date to see the fish. So a reporter and photographer came by. Dr. Smith said: "No photographs." I pleaded with him to let them take some pictures. I had previously taken photographs of the fish on the *Nerine* and at the Museum, but they were all ruined when the photographer, Mr. R. Kirsten, dropped the spool in the mud. "Oh, well," said Dr. Smith, "one photograph." That photograph went round the world, and Mr. Adams, the photographer, made a neat pile. The East London Museum had to buy back a copy from him for two guineas!

I asked Dr. Smith all kinds of questions, which he answered only vaguely. He sat down and said: "To think a fish of this age could exist." I asked: "How old is it?" He counted the rings on the scales, and said it was about 33 years old, but its primitive origins were more like 70 million years old. My mind boggled. So I had been on the right track. It was a living fossil!

February 22, 1939. Dr. Smith phoned to ask for the loan of the fish for

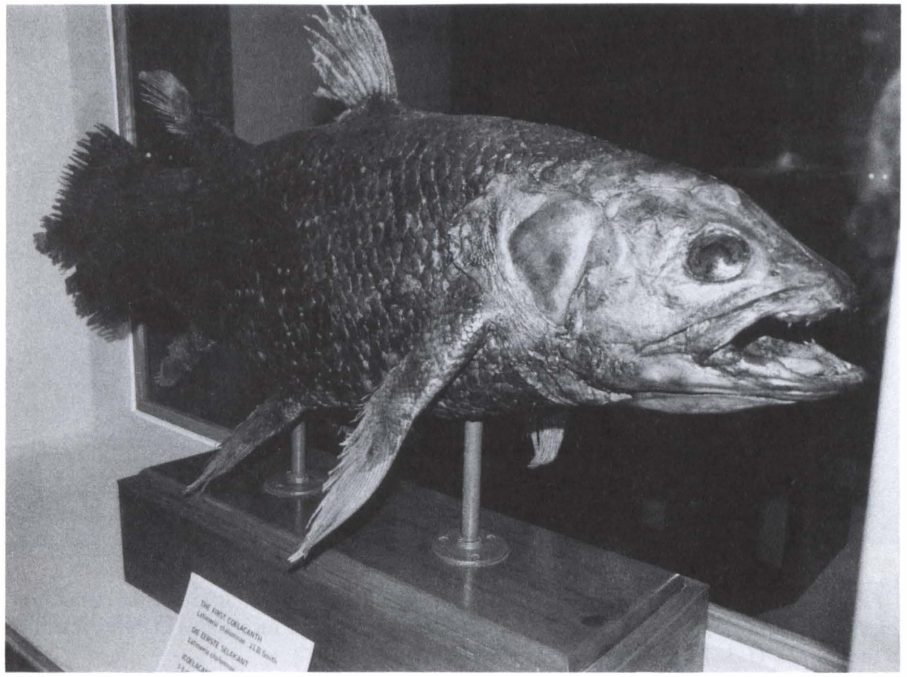

FIG. 7.—The first coelacanth—and the type specimen of *Latimeria chalumnae*—as it may be seen today in the East London Museum, South Africa, 50 years after its discovery by the author. The previous most recent coelacanth was a fossil genus dated at about 80 million years B.P. (J. Richard Greenwell.)

study. The Board agreed, but we were then pestered with visitors wanting to see it, and we had to tell them that the fish was being worked on by Dr. Smith in Grahamstown.

March 29, 1939. Dr. Smith phoned to say that he had named the fish *Latimeria chalumnae,* after me and the Chalumna River, in the mouth of which it had been caught at 40 fathoms. I said I thought it should have been named after Captain Goosen, who had brought it in for me; without him, there would have been no coelacanth. "But you ultimately saved it for science," he said.

Time went by. Finally, the Board decided that the fish should be returned to the East London Museum.

May 3, 1939. The fish was duly sent back to the East London Museum, but it was in sad need of proper mounting.

Dr. E. Gill, Director of the South African Museum, in Cape Town, then wrote to say that their taxidermist, Mr. J. Drury, would undertake the work if we sent it to them. South African Railways very graciously gave me a van

and free passage to Cape Town. The fish and I left East London on August 24, 1939, and I handed the specimen over to Mr. Drury at the South African Museum.

I then met Sir John Wedgewood, who said he would like to strike a Wedgewood commemorative plate of the coelacanth. War intervened, and years passed before he and I finally came to a decision about the plate: the coelacanth in the center, with my favorite marine seashell, the *Pecten,* around the rim.

December 2, 1939. The reconstructed coelacanth arrived back in East London in all its glory. It was a beautiful piece of work by Mr. Drury, together with a very handsome cast of the coelacanth. In thanks and gratitude, we gave the South African Museum a complete colored cast.

December 5, 1939. A wonderful day. The East London Museum received 300 pounds from the Carnegie Trust Fund. This was a godsend to us. We had two cases made to house and display the original specimen and the colored cast, costing a total of 200 pounds. The remaining 100 pounds the Museum sent in gratitude to Captain Goosen.

The coelacanth was now safely housed in the East London Museum. The Board of Trustees then decided to adopt it as the special Museum emblem. Stationery was printed with an impression of the coelacanth, all its crockery bore the emblem, and there was the beautiful Wedgewood plate specially struck to commemorate this remarkable discovery of December 22, 1938: the first coelacanth, *Latimeria chalumnae* Smith, the type specimen, weighing 127 lbs.

And a very, very happy young Museum director decided all the trauma had been worthwhile.